

Patterns of Belonging

Revitalising Craft as a Symbolic Language

Minna Kovero

Pattern design and the woollen crafts of knitting and embroidery offer the possibility to revitalise symbols and create textiles that enhance a sense of belonging. This article examines how certain long-standing patterns and the symbolism of the sacred grass snake – a household guardian spirit in the form of a snake – can be reinterpreted and transformed into woollen knitting designs. The Kotokäärme knitting pattern serves as an example of design as a form of language that tells stories and connects makers and wearers to a broader, multilayered world. The Kotokäärme pattern functions as a living symbol of rootedness in the Finnish-Karelian past and beyond, fostering a sense of belonging to desired contexts.



Belonging is a fundamental condition of human life, shaping how individuals understand themselves and the world around them. It provides a stable centre of meaning and identity, offering a framework through which experiences become coherent and purposeful. When this sense of belonging is present, the world appears ordered and comprehensible; when it is absent, individuals may experience disorientation, rootlessness, and a loss of meaning. Belonging is not a fixed state; it is continuously produced, for example, through cultural processes such as the formation of traditions. In contemporary society, processes of globalisation have disrupted many conventional forms of belonging; yet the human need for connection persists. Individuals and communities continually seek to re-establish meaningful ties, often through the creation of

◀ **FIGURE 1.** *Kotokäärme* pattern, accompanied by books illustrating its Finno-Karelian roots – from descriptions of the grave findings to its contemporary version. Photograph: Minna Kovero, 2026.

bounded social worlds; whether in cultural movements, identity formations, or everyday practices (O'Connor, 2018).

Within this context, craft and patternmaking can be understood as powerful symbolic languages through which belonging is expressed, constructed, and renewed. Patterns are not merely decorative; they carry memory, tradition, and shared meaning. Through repetition, rhythm, and variation, patterns embody the temporal depth of lived experience and mediate relationships between people and the surrounding world. They ground individuals in a meaningful context, transforming abstract belonging into tangible form. Vitalising belonging through patterns can take the form of designing, knitting, embroidering, wearing, and living with textiles, as exemplified by the *Kotokäärme* pattern.

The *Kotokäärme* pattern, along with its processes of creation and use, provides a compelling example of how patterns can enhance a sense of belonging while remaining rooted in the traditional language of textile crafts and symbolism (Figures 1–2). The search for motifs associated with the house snake spirit, *elättikäärme*, guided the design process toward historical textiles. In the Finnish region, old pattern language is primarily known through burial finds, including bands and tablet-woven textiles. These artefacts reveal a rich visual vocabulary, with motifs largely derived from nature and reflecting a relationship with the environment that differs from contemporary perspectives. At the same time, the patterns display a degree of universality, as similar motifs appear across diverse geographical contexts (Karisto & Pasanen, 2015).

Patterns woven over a thousand years ago continue to resonate today, even though their original meanings remain only partially accessible. What we perceive is often their formal complexity, rather than their symbolic content (Karisto & Pasanen, 2015). The *Kotokäärme* motif exemplifies such inherited forms, whose deeply nature-connected symbolism may remain somewhat elusive from a contemporary viewpoint. Similar motifs can be found both in the embroidery of traditional costumes and in contemporary knitwear, through which they have continued to live into the present day. One example is the S-motif band pattern discovered at the Kekomäki burial site in Kaukola (Figure 1), preserved in a narrow tablet-woven band from the upper edge of a wrap skirt. The fragment, approximately 10 mm in width, dates to the Iron Age of Karelia (Karisto & Pasanen, 2015; Schwindt, 2012). Comparable patterns can also be found in contemporary Latvian textiles.

In Latvian tradition, the S-motif refers to the grass snake, *Zalktis* – an important symbol often associated with protection, wisdom, and nurturing qualities (Figure 2). It commonly appears in traditional women's clothing, such as belts, sashes, and mittens. In folk culture, it is sometimes called a “little zigzag” because of its shape. The symbol is widely used in decorative patterns and appears in folk art. It is believed to carry the wisdom of ancestors, and wearing items with this symbol helps pass on that knowledge and protection (Kraukle, 2014).

The *Kotokäärme* pattern and its name come from the folkloric guardian serpent, *elättikäärme*, a grass snake believed to protect the home (Huhtaniemi, 2020; Gimbutas, 1989). Snakes were understood as protectors not only of the home but also, in mythological contexts, of the entire world. In Finland, domestic guardian snakes were valued for their role in driving away mice, rats, and even vipers, and were also associated with the deceased and household guardian spirits. As protectors of both the home and the cosmos, snakes have served as human helpers for thousands of years (Kovalainen, 2009).

The design of the *Kotokäärme* pattern investigates cultural roots through a blending of traditions, reflecting a sense of transnational belonging.



◀ **FIGURE 2.** Books and inspirational materials for understanding the real grass snake and its Latvian ornaments, featuring motifs similar to those found in old Finnish designs. Photograph: Minna Kovero, 2025.



◀ **FIGURE 3.** Embroidered motif created using Pohjolanpääsi Karelian red wool yarn. The dark brown base is knitted from Taulavuori Farms Kainuu Grey yarn. Photograph: Minna Kovero, 2025.

Closely related traditions of domestic snakes are also found in Sweden, with similar practices documented in Russia and the Baltic states. These snakes could be kept like other household animals and were sometimes given individual names and specific calls to bring them forth. In Western Finland, they were commonly kept in farm households, whereas in Eastern Finland and Karelia, they were more closely associated with ritual specialists, or *tietäjät*. A powerful *tietäjä* was believed to be able to call forth a snake to act on their behalf (Huhtaniemi, 2020). The *Kotokäärme* pattern navigates the space between northern traditions and creative freedom, seeking a serpent symbol for the present that embodies both personal and collective wisdom, drawn from northern nature and cultural heritage.

Through the *Kotokäärme* knitted surface, the essence of the serpent is explored, along with its positive symbolism and connections to feminine power and healing. The snake has symbolised healing since ancient times, from Hermes' caduceus to Asclepius' single-serpent staff, still used as

a symbol by physicians, pharmacists, and the WHO (Kovalainen, 2009). Early humans revered creativity and the generative power of women, with the goddess embodied in both human and earth. In pre-Christian traditions, snakes were often feminine, linked to Mother Earth (Gimbutas, 1989).

In the *Kotokäärme* pattern, red knitted snakes flame across Mother Earth's dark brown soil, representing grounded flows of energy (Figures 3–4). The interplay of structured and organic ornamentation reflects a search for holistic balance. The motif is also connected to natural healing and empowerment: the serpent, strongly associated with renewal, is often regarded as a healer's familiar. Snakes have long been linked to magical healing herbs and were believed to possess special knowledge or power related to healing and medicine. They were also thought to ensure fertility and health for both humans and animals. In many traditions, the life energy of the snake was understood to be directly connected to that of the human under its protection, forming a deep and vital bond between them (Gimbutas, 1989).

FIGURE 4.
Ancient snake
motifs alongside the
Kotokäärme pattern.
Photograph: Minna
Kovero, 2026.



The *Kotokäärme* pattern was knitted into a collar and embroidered on top of a knitted woollen container for northern sweetgrass (Attachment page 194). The serpent pattern works on a voluminous collar or a poncho-style wrap, and it can also be adapted to other flared garments and accessories that emphasise femininity. Elements of the serpent motif can be used as embroidery designs for smaller objects such as herbal pouches and containers. These accessories highlight the healing practices related to folk medicine and bring belonging to this rooted practice and the culture surrounding it.

Designing meaningful patterns and ornamental objects becomes a way of reactivating belonging in a fragmented world. By drawing on local narratives, collective memory, and culturally embedded symbols, craft can create visual and material “centres of meaning” that foster connection. These patterns can function as bridges between past and present, individual and community, the local and the global. In doing so, they offer a means of resisting the flattening effects of globalisation by reintroducing depth and identity into everyday life.

Ultimately, belonging is not something that can be passively inherited; it must be continually created, renewed, and revitalised. Craft, grounded in repetition, care, and material engagement, provides a powerful framework for this process. Through the intentional design and use of patterns, it is possible to revitalise shared cultural meanings and sustain the symbolic structures that support both personal identity and collective life. In this way, textiles such as the *Kotokäärme* pattern become living symbols of connection, memory, and belonging, actively breathing new life into traditions.

References

- Gimbutas, M. (1989). *The language of the goddess: Unearthing the hidden symbols of Western civilization*. Harper & Row.
- Huhtaniemi, E. (2020). *Suomalaiset elättikäärmeet*. AntroBlogi. <https://antroblogi.fi/2020/04/suomalaiset-elattikaarmeet/>
- Karisto, M., & Pasanen, M. (2015). *Omenaisia ja revonneniä: Suomalaisia lautanauhoja = Applesies and fox noses: Finnish tabletwoven bands*. Salakirjat.
- Kovalainen, K. (2009). Palvottu, vihattu käärme. *Suomen Luonto*, 3. <https://suomenluonto.fi/artikkelit/palvottu-vihattu-kaarme/>
- Kraukle, D. (2014). *Ceļvedis latvisko zīmju pasaulē: Ornaments [A guide to the world of Latvian symbols: Ornament]*. Zvaigzne.
- O'Connor, P. (2018). *Home: The foundations of belonging*. Routledge.
- Schwindt, T. (2012). *Tietoja Karjalan rautakaudesta, 1893 ja sitä seuraavilta ajoilta: Käkisalmen kihlakunnan alalta saatujen löytöjen mukaan*. Salakirjat.
- Schwindt, T. (2015). *Traditional Finnish decorative bands* (Original work published 1903). Salakirjat.